

BENCHMARKS

By Glenn Alterman

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SYNOPSIS: Benches, they used to be just for the rich, the privileged, now all people can sit and rest. Telly and Ted find themselves sitting on the same bench, waiting for a bus. This existential drama contemplates life, death, and the hereafter.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(1 female, 1 male)

TELLY (f)..... Can seem a bit rough, always
speaks her mind. Age: 30's to
70's. *(53 lines)*

TED (m)..... A kind, caring man. Age: 30's to
70's. *(54 lines)*

TIME: Dusk.

SETTING: A bench at a bus stop on a busy highway.

AT START: *In the dark we hear cars going by on a busy highway. As the lights come up, we see TELLY sitting alone on a bench at a bus stop on a busy highway. TELLY is staring straight out, expressionless, into the ongoing traffic. By her side of the bench is a tied, half-filled trash bag. After a moment, TED enters. He is dragging a very large, filled trash bag. They look at each other for a moment.*

TED: *(Indicating the bench, a polite smile.)* May I?

TELLY: *(Pleasantly.)* Sure.

TED: *(Sitting.)* Thanks.

TED leaves his bag by his side of the bench. They are both quiet for a moment, staring out into the traffic.

TED: Been waiting long?

TELLY: I don't know, feels like forever.

TED: Yeah, know what you mean. Should be here soon. *(A beat. Then, smiling.)* I'm gonna see "the family."

TELLY: That's nice.

TED: Can't wait.

TELLY: *(After a moment.)* Did you know that benches were originally designed for the common people?

TED: What?

TELLY: Yeah, the upper class got to sit in chairs. Well-constructed, probably very expensive, handmade chairs.

TED: Really? I had no...

TELLY: *(Continuing.)* They got to rest their upper-class asses on elegant, well designed... well I assume they were well designed, but most certainly they were comfortable and *cushiony*. While the poor people sat on hard wooden benches. Just think of it, the indignity! They now knew their place in the world. They were commoners, delegated to "the bench." And so they sat there, perhaps begrudgingly, or, I don't know, maybe just resigned, thinking, SHIT, I'M SITTING ON A GOD-DAMNED BENCH!

TED: *(Looking at TELLY.)* Huh.

TELLY: And now here we are, you and me, on one of maybe, maybe a million benches. You know they're everywhere, benches. Anywhere you go, they're there. And they're not just for the poor anymore.

TED: I hadn't really...

TELLY: (*Continuing.*) Every country, every park, every bus stop, streets, malls, even in the middle of nowhere, for no apparent reason, there they are. These wood and cement or wood and metal fixtures. Furniture. Just waiting to be sat on or slept on. Day and night. Cold or warm. They're there, waiting for those who are waiting. The weary traveler or the tired or the poor. Or people like us, waiting for a bus. —Yeah, I know, I talk too much.

TED: Well I...

TELLY: We've got bigger eggs to fry.

TED: What?

TELLY: So, you're happy to be going home, huh?

TED: Uh, yeah; yes.

TELLY: To see your family and friends?

TED: Right.

TELLY: Families can be fun—for some. Little Johnny with his toys, Aunt Minnie being bubbly. Uncle Walt, always drunk. Longtime friends. Old lovers. People we haven't seen—you don't say very much.

TED: Well to be honest, you haven't really given me a moment to...

TELLY: Ya gotta grab the mic, say what's on your mind! Make like it's closing time at the bar! Last call, now-or-never!

TED: (*A definite edge.*) Well I would if you'd let me.

TELLY: Good for you, sarcasm, you put me in my place. I like that. People usually don't. What's your name?

TED: Ted.

TELLY: Nice to meet you Ted, I'm Telly. So, Ted, tell me, what's on your mind? I'm all ears. (*Smiling.*) The bench is yours!

TED: Well, as I said, I'm looking forward to seeing everyone.

TELLY: Yeah, well, I'm not.

TED: No.

TELLY: I don't want to go home, ever.

TED: Why not?

TELLY: It pains me.

TED: I'm sorry.

TELLY: So, what have you got in that big bag?

TED: Just... artifacts.

TELLY: Oh, you're a collector?

TED: No, but I do save things. Important things. Things I'd like to remember. Moments; mementos.

TELLY: You're a hoarder.

TED: No, I only save the good stuff. Things that brought me joy.

TELLY: (*Smiling.*) That's a big bag, a lot of happy. A lot of schlepping.

TED: Actually, it's quite light. You'd be surprised.

TELLY: (*Looking at him, sincerely.*) You're very lucky, Ted. I mean it. It's no wonder your bag is so filled.

TED: What's in your bag, Telly?

TELLY: Nothing, just a lot of stuff. Things I've accumulated over the years. Nothing of any real value. Just—stuff.

TED: You know those people you were just talking about, one's who had to sit on the benches.

TELLY: The commoners?

TED: Yeah. Y'know, I bet you some of them weren't all that unhappy.

TELLY: No?

TED: I mean, hey, think about it, they did have a place to sit, to rest. Maybe some of them were actually content. Thought, "You know, it could be worse."

TELLY: Worse?

TED: Sure, they could be sitting on the floor, the ground, in the dirt. I think what I'm trying to say is that maybe sometimes cushiony chairs don't always make for comfortable seating. There's no guarantee. Sometimes just making do, being content with where you happen to be seated can be enough. (*Looks at TELLY, smiling.*) So tell me, really, what's in your bag?

TELLY: I told you, Ted, nothing. Nothing to speak of.

They're quiet for a moment. The sound of traffic. Then, looking down the road.

TED: I think I see the bus.

TELLY: (*Looking.*) Yeah?

TED: S'way down there, end of the highway. See?

TELLY: (*Slightly apprehensive.*) That's it, huh?

TED: (*Smiling.*) Think so.

TELLY: (*After a moment she suddenly gets up.*) Y'know, I don't think I'm gonna go.

TED: Why not?

TELLY: (*Grabs her bag.*) I don't know. Just changed my mind. Think I'll stay right here.

TED: On the bench? (*Going to TELLY.*) But you've got people waiting.

TELLY: (*Sitting down.*) I'll just wait for the next one. There's always another bus.

TED: (*Sitting next to TELLY.*) Telly, look, I really don't know you very well. And excuse my being so forward. But... it's my guess you've been sitting here on this bench for quite a while.

TELLY: So?

TED: I don't know, maybe you're one of those people you were talking about. The ones who hated sitting on benches. But they did. They just sat and sat, and remained unhappy. And blamed it on the bench.

TELLY: What's your point?

TED: (*Looking at TELLY.*) Maybe it's time, Telly.

TELLY: For what?

TED: To get on the bus and go.

TELLY: (*Clutching her bag, a loud outburst.*) NO!

TED: (*Going to TELLY.*) Why not? There's nothing here, just some wood and cement, a bench on a highway.

TELLY: Mind your own business!

TED: But you'll never get there if you remain here. It's a bus stop. It's supposed to be temporary. A waiting point. Somewhere between here and where you want to go.

TELLY: (*Apprehensive.*) I told you, I don't-want-to-go!

TED: (*Softly.*) Why not?

TELLY: I want to stay, here, right here!

TED: The bus is coming, Telly. Why don't you want to go?

TELLY: (*Looking at TED.*) I'm afraid, okay; happy?

TED: (*Gently.*) Telly, we all are. We're all afraid. We're all just commoners on a bench waiting for a bus. But sooner or later we have to get on. And then we can just relax, let the driver take us to where we have to go. And the best part is we don't have to do anything. We can just sit back in those comfortable cushiony chairs and—relax. And look out the windows. And think. And remember.

TELLY: (*Looking at TED.*) You really want to know what's in my bag?

TED: What?

TELLY: It's not nothing.

TED: No?

TELLY: It's a whole lot of lonely; a lifetime of lonely.

TED: Oh.

TELLY: Do you understand?

TED: Yes, that's very sad. ...Why don't you just leave it behind?

TELLY: What?

TED: The bag, leave it here at the bus stop.

TELLY: You can do that?

TED: Sure, why not? You've paid your fare. You can bring whatever you want or don't want with you.

TELLY looks at TED for a moment. Then she carefully places the bag down by the side of the bench, looks at it for a moment.

TELLY: (*Looking at TED, smiling.*) Done.

TED: (*Smiling.*) Done.

TELLY: I never knew.

TED: Well it's never too late. And... (*Looks down the road, then turns to TELLY.*) here comes the bus.

TELLY: (*A bit frightened.*) I see it.

The headlights from the bus starts shining on them.

TELLY: (*Looking into the light.*) It's not how I thought it would...

TED: I know.

TELLY: (*A look of surprise in her eyes, touched, softly.*) It's... so beautiful.

TED: (*Softly.*) Yes.

TELLY goes over to TED, looks at him, then gently holds on to him.

TED: *(Softly.)* Here it comes.

TELLY: *(Smiling, softly.)* Here it comes.

TED puts his arms around TELLY, holds her. They both cling to each other, look towards the bus. The light from the bus shines brighter and brighter on them. The sound of the traffic gets louder and louder. Then, blackout.

THE END